



PURVIS YOUNG

The artist lives and works in Miami, Florida. His work has been featured in several major exhibitions of self-taught art including *Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present* organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art, *Pictured in My Mind: Contemporary American Self-Taught Art from the Collection of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen* organized by the Birmingham Museum of Art and *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology* organized by the Museum of American Folk Art in New York. Young's works can be found in numerous public and private collections.

Cover
Horses Fighting Over the City

Flap
Truckin' in Overtown (detail)

All works in this exhibition are provided courtesy of Joy Moos Gallery.

Museum of Contemporary Art

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Loved Man

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although it just so happens that the last five one-person exhibitions at the MCA have featured artists who are actively teaching at various American colleges and universities, one does not have to be conversant in the latest trends in critical theory to make challenging and stimulating images that both appeal to the eye and address human, natural and/or spiritual concerns. This exhibition, surveying the more than twenty-year production of Florida native Purvis Young, is an exquisite example that self-taught artists have important voices too in the pluralistic art scene of the fin-de-siècle 1990s. Young's paintings, drawings and mixed-media constructions address contemporary issues – the plight of would-be immigrants fleeing repressive homelands for greater opportunities in other countries, for example – in a manner that, as Wendy Steiner has suggested, has more affinities to twentieth-century avant-garde artists such as Klee, Calder, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg than to other "outsiders" with whom the artist is often compared.

I would like to thank Purvis Young for his enthusiasm for this exhibition. Although I long have been familiar with Young's work, having first seen his art in Chicago a decade ago, it was only through a tip by long-time MCA friend Bruce Webber that I came to know of a large collection of the artist's work in South Florida. I would like to thank Joy Moos who made available her entire collection of over four hundred of Young's works from which over one hundred paintings, drawings, mixed-media constructions and books were selected for this exhibition. I would like to thank Ingrid Evans for her enlightening essay, Lois Zetter and Frank Hill, two West Coast collectors and appreciators of Young's art, Elaine Weber for her usual handsome design of the brochure, Joe and Leena Pilcher for helping me to transport the works from Miami and install them onto the Museum walls, and Jennifer Parker, who helped to coordinate many of the details associated with the exhibition's presentation. The Palm Beach Community College Foundation funded this exhibition. Finally, I would like to salute President Barry Pinciss and the other valiant members of the Museum's Board of Directors who support stimulating exhibitions such as this one and have a vision for an enhanced Museum of Contemporary Art in the Palm Beaches where many more challenging and educational projects like this can occur.

Jim Peele
Director and Curator

Museum of Contemporary Art

PURVIS YOUNG

Walking Among the Peoples



January 16 ~ February 28, 1999

ART AS RAISON D'ÊTRE

by INGRID EVANS

For Purvis Young, art is his reason for being. It is his way of dealing with life, with the visual stimuli of his environment, limned with the social and economic undercurrents from which they stem. Artists like Young are generally categorized as “outsiders” or “self-taught” regardless of their level of achievement and differences within the group. They operate on the periphery of the official art world and usually continue this practice after being discovered by mainstream sources. They are not driven by career concerns, the search for the new, or the latest wrinkle in artspeak. Marginally educated and with little or no knowledge of art history, most of them pursue their visions in relative isolation. Total innocence, of course, becomes a moot point in the age of information.

Purvis Young still lives in Overtown, an urban ghetto located within the city limits of Miami, even though his work has been shown in Europe as well as in the States, with collectors on both continents. His life and work are well-documented, and several dealers handle his voluminous output. But his style has remained the same despite contacts with dealers, curators and the press. Initially his resolve to become an artist led him to libraries where he discovered old and modern masters as models for his own work. Like much autodidactic learning, information was acquired in a non-linear way. Thus, grounded in the random sources of personal experience, chance encounters with books and subsequent readings, he found his own voice.



themes here, as elsewhere, are rooted in his milieu.

Finding new uses for discarded items is consistent with Young's attitude toward art materials as he re-contextualizes the detritus of daily existence. He uses what he finds in his neighborhood, the stuff of life; he uses it because it is there and it is free, with little or no regard to any intrinsic message. Of course, the line between medium and message is always drawn in quicksand and the components of his constructions still convey traces of litter and decay.

Consider, for example, a mixed-media work such as *Peoples and the Horses*. Assembled from multiple paintings of various dimensions, it contains some stock imagery – horses, human figures and houses. Since the individual segments were created separately on different grounds, they probably were not painted in sequence but rather organized on a support according to a sense of design, but without losing any of the overall narrative. Here, amidst disaster, groups of people are rendered in expressionistic shorthand along the baseline of the major panels. Horses, riders and crowds appear to be in conflict, judging by the placement of the potential protagonists (upper left panel). The red color of the rough frame underscores the aspect of violence.



Peoples and the Horses



Lonely Rider

ridden by spirits in humanoid form is another question.

While the shape of the horse appears without much variation, primitively rendered, its meaning might be gleaned from the surrounding imagery. The horses depicted in *Horses Fighting Over the City*, one black, one white, appear to be rearing against each other in the center of the picture plane, otherwise filled with houses in an urban setting. Obviously, opposing forces are at work here and the diagonal placement of the animals underscores a sense of unrest. Are the people clustered at the top right the cause of the conflict or the participants in it? They are, however small and faintly rendered, an integral part of the incident. Pictures such as this transmit their themes with an uncanny immediacy to viewers who have no knowledge of the specific events.



Soldier to the Mountains, 1985

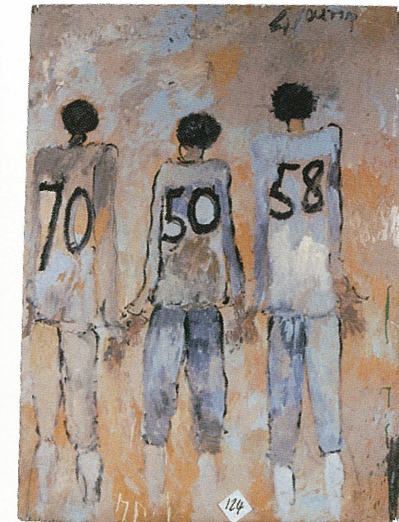
In the oil painting on wood *Soldier to the Mountains*, the rider, in a triumphant pose, is placed in a background of deftly-handled brush strokes from which groups of figures faintly emerge. In shades of pink, yellow, white and gray, this work alludes to paint and subject matter simultaneously.

Purvis Young has developed his own shorthand for the human form. It can be a kind of stick figure, sometimes stiff but more often handled with fluid brush work that determines the degree of expressiveness without individuation. Figures appear in groups, as pattern, or populating a scene as people collectively. A rare exception is the picture of three men in *Heros*. They dominate the space as athletes, displaying large black numbers on shirts resembling football jerseys. The use of numbers, so the story goes, harkens back to the childhood of the artist when his mother supported him by running numbers.

Boat Peoples, a diptych executed in house paint on used plywood, describes the plight of Haitian refugees, their sea journey and subsequent arrival in Florida. An angel hovers over the scene, symbolized by a large head and halo, probably as guardian or spirit watching over the movements of mortals. Its presence is central to many other compositions, always in the guise of a large head and yellow glow. Spirits from a better world?

Interesting questions arise regarding the recurring motif of the horse. Shown alone as primary image or in groups, with or without riders, it seems to carry different story lines. One is reminded of the many roles horses have played in the mythology, art and literature of most cultures, moving through time from the chthonic to the celestial. Stories derived from ancient sources are the staple of folklore and fantasy, and everyone is familiar with some version of the paranormal powers of these animals.

On a more basic level, in line with the notion that Purvis Young paints mostly what he observes, urban dwellers know horses mostly from movies, television, or first-hand encounters with mounted police. Whether or not he is familiar with old voodoo tales of Haitian and African origins where men, possessed, turn into horses to be



Heros

lament and accusation pointing to the plight and causes of inner-city strife – a thread that runs through most of this work. A prominently placed large blue eye is emblematic of a system perceived as oppressive, and it appears in many other pictures, always with similar connotations.

An exhibition such as this poses many questions. Is art driven by intellect, by inner necessity, or by personal demons? Is it the manifestation of a traumatized libido or the compulsion to fabricate? How do these sources affect artistic expression overall?

Tomes have been written about the nature of creativity and the relationship between art, myth and madness in efforts to plumb the depth from which inspiration might arise. Whether one accepts Jung's notion of a collective unconscious where archetypal images reside in the recesses of the mind ready to be uncovered in their raw state or whether the unintentional rawness of most outsider art is attributable to lack of formal and technical training, mainstream artists have found inspiration in self-taught art in their search for the elemental.

The pendulum swinging between modernist concerns and primitive objects has occupied artists for some time. Picasso's use of African masks and Dubuffet's connection with *art brut* prompted others to investigate these areas for authenticity and formal innovations. But comparing and contrasting the work of artists who intentionally dispense with their acquired skills with the work of the self-taught who are unencumbered by contemporary thought and theory is a challenging endeavor. Yet those designated as outsiders are participants in the contemporary scene. Viewers are drawn to their work, and it is safe to say that the creative impulse remains a mystery – mercifully.



Boat Peoples

Ingrid Evans is an artist and freelance writer based in Reno, Nevada.